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AUDIO LIBRARY OF A VIEWABLE WORLD

NONMUSIC AUDIO, LIBRARY, MEDIA, YOUTUBE

The following text is based on a presentation I gave at the Ultrablack Non-ference that took place in October 2023, in Graz, Austria. It introduces my website-specific YouTube project called the *Audio Library of a Viewable World*, and the concept of website-specific art as a whole. This text expands on the lecture which is available to watch [here](#).

YouTube's Audio Library is an archive of 4000 sound effects for anyone to use, for free, in their videos, and was created in 2014. Millions of people have since heard these sounds repeatedly without knowing about their origin, who created and published them. The sound samples are ordered into 20 alphabetic categories – Alarms, Ambiences, Animals, Cartoon, Crowds, Doors,

Emergency, Foley, Horror, Household, Human Voices, Impacts, Office, Science Fiction, Sport, Tools, Transport, Water, Weapons and lastly, Weather.

These categories can be interpreted as an unintended taxonomy of YouTube's overall soundscape, as they define the types of sounds which are deemed useful for content creators. Each video of this project is based on one of these 20 categories, using its samples as exclusive, largely unmodified sonic material. The videos make creative use of YouTube functions like subtitles, live streams, keyboard shortcuts and others, and thereby utilise the inherent interactive potential of the platform.

Website-Specific Art

Approaching an existing website like this is what I call Website-Specific Art – a word play of sorts, emphasising the site-specific spatial character of art on the internet. This project forms the second chapter of that strategy towards online media platforms. The first instalment, composed of the works *TRACK*, *PLAYLIST*, and *STREAM* for SoundCloud, culminated in the exhibition *SoundCloud Gazing: Website-Specific Music* at /rosa, Berlin (2022), a space run by the Zentrum für Netzkunst. The original premise of this approach is that contemporary internet platforms wield an unparalleled and novel influence over our mutating perception of media, and even over the perception of our everyday environments. Platforms like YouTube are reframing our individual experience (aesthesis) of art, culture and daily life as a whole. This notion applies a commonly seen strategy in modernist art to our contemporary digitalised horizon: The renegotiation of frame and picture, or in other words, the focus on the conditions underlying creation itself – from metaphysics to creative processes, to physical, technological and socio-economic conditions.

What we observe in today's digitalisation is an accumulation of all those necessary conditions entirely in the hands of platforms. Not only do these platforms shape our consumption and in some regards, our worldview; they have an ever-growing power over artistic production as they determine the technical conditions for distribution, as well as they influence our imagination. In fact, as this project shows, platforms have expanded to providing the creative tools, in our case with the audio library. YouTube, like many others, is thereby attempting a control of the entire process that circles around production, distribution and consumption. Far from the hopes of the first YouTuber generations for a community-driven environment, YouTube has become a living example for the all absorbing and encompassing nature of platform capitalism.

By enabling easy access to online video almost 20 years ago, YouTube has remodelled the entire sphere of visibility. It has created things we all know. It is creating things that we all will use, see or listen to day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. The reversal is of course equally true: It suppresses things that none of us shall know, because it chooses what we should or should not be aware of. It is an enactor and an emanatory figure of a global cultural power against which Website-Specific Art takes a critical stance.

In the next paragraphs, we will look at several videos of the *Audio Library of a Viewable World* and discuss how specific features of YouTube were used artistically.

Doors

On a white background, five doors are shown from left to right: a dark house entrance from the inside, a neighbour's front door, a wooden door belonging to a confession chamber, a transparent revolving door, and a white cubicle door of a public toilet. The doors are presented in the style of YouTube Shorts (<1min videos) as they appear on the start page. Below each door is written 'subtitle: Door' and the numbers 1 to 5, which refer to different subtitles for each video/door that can be chosen. As the sounds remain barely audible digital artefacts, selecting a subtitle resembles the act of eavesdropping. (YouTube) video is here thought of as a voyeuristic medium, invoked through the metaphor of the door. Doors allow glances into other spaces, whilst also maintaining their separation.

Cartoon

Technically, *Cartoon* is not a video. It would be better to describe it as a chain reaction of cartoon sound effects, turned into an avalanche gradually through their delays – analogous to the illusion of movement by placing similar images behind each other. The screen, however, remains black unless the subtitles are turned on. A cryptic text then appears in a seemingly woven font that covers the whole screen. Every few seconds, the text slightly changes, creating different textures at a slow-motion frame-rate. Viewers are invited to zoom in and out by pressing the keys + or -.

Science Fiction

On YouTube, it is possible to schedule a live video, so that it will be streamed at a given date, and that people know when they can watch it live. The furthest date into the future that a video can be scheduled is two years. However, my continuous postponing of this video will make sure it is never published to be viewed whatsoever. The future remains forever evasive. No video can depict it. In the constellation of stars, glowing to us from the distant past, we have a blank slate.

Tools

A platform like YouTube can be conceived of as a place of consumption as well as a place of production. In reality, both these aspects are irrevocably intermeshed. As YouTube provides feedback to the video creator in the form of likes, comments, and analytics, video creators are led to tailor their videos directly towards specific 'target audiences'. Potential viewers are targeted like wild beasts, grouped into cattle (audiences) and tamed into reliable subscribers.

But besides this story of consumption is that of another possibility of use. British artist and director Peter Greenaway has argued that the end of traditional cinema was the market release of the remote control, as it introduced interactive audience control into television. Earlier even, the pianist Glenn Gould thought that playback and recording devices would enable people to edit their favourite recordings of classical music and thereby make their own elaborate interpretations. It seems legitimate to state, half a century later, that this idea has failed disastrously. Certainly, the capacity for both image and sound editing has spread like wildfire, especially among younger generations. Nonetheless, the accessibility of tools brought with it a previously concealed wave of stupidity that now floods the digital sewers, rather than sharpening the masses' aesthetic appreciation.

Tools is in that sense perhaps a bit of a nostalgic exercise. It places keyboard shortcuts in the video screen, which the viewer can press to control the video playback (e. g. play/pause, speed, view, time stamps). The video then is both the score to be performed and the result to be perceived, turning the viewer into an interpreter and the laptop into an instrument. The image of the key to be pressed appears in the same position as it would be on a typical laptop keyboard. All footage is coated in the grey metal colour of an Apple computer. Tools' screen is an interface, and an abysmal mirror of the device used to watch it.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1U1tzd8sN7Q&list=PLkrmEz14GzNNo_jmf_dmmzs-xiZfPVjji&index=10)

[v=1U1tzd8sN7Q&list=PLkrmEz14GzNNo_jmf_dmmzs-xiZfPVjji&index=10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1U1tzd8sN7Q&list=PLkrmEz14GzNNo_jmf_dmmzs-xiZfPVjji&index=10) (OPEN IN NEW TAB)

What next? Among the upcoming videos in this project are: Household – a video supposed to be played on a phone placed in specific locations of the viewer's flat to blur digital content and daily life, Ambiences – a 360 video of crossfading and spinning spaces, and Crowds – a non-stop livestream whose live chat will be immortalised within the video. Please subscribe to the YouTube channel for further updates.

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